▼▼▼CHAPTER 10

Literature

Few African-Americans prior to the Civil War were able to record their experiences for us. After all, the vast majority were enslaved, at least in the South. All but a few were unable to read and write. They had little time to reflect on their lives. The first autobiography by an enslaved African was written in 1831. The first book of essays by an African-American was published in 1841. The first novel was published in 1859. Such works were few and far between. After the Civil War, life began to change. Change was not easy because living on farms tied most freedmen to long days of hard labor. However, when they had the chance to get an education, they took advantage of it. Many began to express themselves on paper. As a result we can find a large body of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry from the late 1800s and the 1900s. Freedom enabled many South Carolinians to express themselves through the written word.

How can we categorize South Carolina's African-American writers? In many ways each individual is different. Nevertheless, they share a common experience as an oppressed minority. Most rose out of poverty to succeed in life. All of them are or were spokespersons for other African-Americans. In their work, they describe what life was like for African-Americans in their own time. Some were scholars without whom we would know little about African-American culture before the modern era. Some were civil rights leaders who spoke out against racial injustice. Some wrote stories that provide African-American children with a literature of their own. Many wrote both fiction and non-fiction.

Perhaps their special perspective makes these South Carolina writers unique and gives them all something in common. Look at these lines from a modern-day South Carolina poet, Winthrop College professor Dr. Dorothy Perry Thompson. In her poem "Wheeler Hill," she describes the "boundaries" between the African-American neighborhood in Columbia where she grew up and the surrounding white neighborhoods. She expresses a different set of feelings than would a writer from another ethnic group.

> "Everything's serious now
> Wish I could go back to the time
> When we laughed all over Barnwell Street
> 'Cause Tank tore his pant
> When he tried to climb the fence
> To see what the white folks were doing
> In those big, brick houses on the other side.
> They had a sign on our side.
> KEEP OUT, it read And we did. . ."

[From *Wheeler Hill and Other Poems,* copyright 1987 by Dorothy Perry Thompson. Used with permission of Dorothy Perry Thompson.]

Brer Rabbit Stories: Simon Brown and Dr. William Faulkner

Let us go back and begin with the spoken rather than written word. Ever since humans learned to talk, they have loved to tell stories. Inevitably, many tales are lost or changed as they are told and retold. As we noted in an earlier chapter, many versions of the "trickster" stories exist. We are fortunate that someone cared enough to tell the stories and that someone else cared enough to write them down and have them published. The published stories have allowed us to preserve some of the best of the tales that enslaved African-Americans told in the time before the Civil War.

Generations of children have enjoyed the stories about the trickster Brer Rabbit, who usually

seems to come out a winner in the battle of wits with his animal friends. Simon Brown, a former enslaved African-American from Virginia, recounted many of these stories. He told these stories to his young friend, William Faulkner. As a boy, Faulkner lived on his family's farm in Society Hill. In 1900 when Faulkner was ten years old, Simon Brown came to work there. Over the next seven years, Simon Brown told the child many stories about these animals who could talk, as well as tales about life during enslavement. Brown died while Faulkner was away at college and was buried in a cemetery in Society Hill. Faulkner graduated from college and received a doctoral degree in philosophy. He served as a minister and a secretary for the YMCA. Always interested in folklore, Faulkner became known as a teller of tales from African-American folklore. These were eventually published in a book entitled *The Days When Animals Talked.*

The stories have a universal appeal, but they are more than simple children's tales. Enslaved African-Americans who were able to identify themselves with Brer Rabbit handed them down. They give us some insight into the feelings and sense of humor of these enslaved people. Like the enslaved African-Americans, Brer Rabbit had to rely on his own intelligence and abilities to survive. Many of the stories will tickle your funnybone as well. "Brer Fox Meets Mr. Trouble" is typical.

Brer Rabbit met Brer Fox one morning on the big road.

"How are you, Brer Rabbit?" asked Brer Fox.

"I'm not feeling too good, Brer Fox," answered Brer Rabbit. "Trouble's been visiting me."

"What do you mean, Trouble? Who's he, and what's he like?" asked Brer Fox.

"Brer Fox, you mean to tell me you've never met Mister Trouble, and you wouldn't know him if you saw him?" responded Brer Rabbit in surprise.

"No, sir, I wouldn't know Trouble if I met him in the middle of the big road," said Brer Fox.

"Well, I'll take you to where Mister Trouble lives, and you can meet him," proposed Brer Rabbit.

"Thank you, Brer Rabbit. I'd like to meet him," replied Brer Fox.

"Let's go, then, because I think he's still at home," said Brer Rabbit.

So off they went.

When they got close to a barnyard, Brer Rabbit said, "Right over there in that barn is where Mister Trouble stays. All you have to do is go over there in front of that door, stand up on your hind legs, and holler, 'Wahoo! Mister Trouble!' and he will come out."

Brer Fox crawled under the fence and went over to the barn. He stood up on his hind legs in front of the door and yelled as loud as he could, "Wahoo! Mister Trouble!"

And then Mister Trouble came bursting out of that barn door in the form of a passel of hound dogs such as Brer Fox had never seen in all his born days! When the hounds saw Brer Fox a-standing there, they lit after him with such a barking as you've never heard in your life. The whole kit and caboodle came tumbling over themselves as they tried to grab Brer Fox.

Poor old Brer Fox hardly got two jumps ahead of those hounds before they were on top of him as he scrambled through a hole in the fence. Two hounds grabbed his tail so hard that it broke off in their mouths, and he was a bobtailed fox from that day to this.

Brer Rabbit just stood there a-looking at poor old Brer Fox. And then he said solemnly, "Never go looking for Trouble, Brer Fox. He'll find you soon enough."

[From *The Days When the Animals Talked: Black American Folktales and How They Came to Be,* by William J. Faulkner. Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1977. Reprinted with permission of Marie Faulkner Brown.]

No doubt you figured out the ending long before Brer Fox did. Regardless, Brer Rabbit gave him sound advice!

Fiction and Poetry

In addition to other obstacles, African-American writers had difficulty in finding publishers in the 1800s. As a result, a "flowering" of African-American fiction did not take place until the 1900s.

Much of the early writing prior to 1900 had a religious theme. Many of those who published in the 1800s did so privately or with the help of the AME and the Baptist church presses. In the early 1900s, many African-American writers had to depend on newspapers and magazines with African-American ownership. Some earned their living doing other kinds of work. Among them were several ministers. Many of these people are not well-known today. You may not be able to find their work in your local library.

Nevertheless, we can pick and choose from many talented people when we describe the literary contributions of South Carolina's African-Americans. They include J. Max Barber of Blackstock, a poet and editor of *Voice of the Negro;* Joshua Henry Jones, Jr. of Orangeburg, a poet, journalist, and novelist whose works include *The Heart of the World and Other Poems* (1919); and William Pickens of Anderson County, a civil rights leader, editor, and educator, who was field secretary for the NAACP for twenty years.

Some of the authors from the middle 1900s to the modern day include Vivian Ayers of Chester, a poet, playwright, and teacher who wrote *Spice Dawns* (1953); Julian Mayfield of Greer, a playwright, actor, and novelist whose works include *Fire* (1949) and *The Other Foot* (1952); Mamie Fields, author of *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir* (1983); journalist John McCray; Nikki Finney of Sumter, a contemporary poet and novelist; Dori Sanders of York County, who wrote the award-winning book *Clover* (1990) as well as another book about South Carolina, *Her Own Place* (1993); and Listervelt Middleton of Pineville, a broadcaster and poet, whose work has appeared in a number of anthologies and magazines.

In addition to these, many more African-Americans have been busy writing. In the following pages, you will meet a few of them.

Clarissa M. Thompson of Columbia may have been the first African-American woman from South Carolina to have her work published. She was the author of *Treading the Winepress: or, A Mountain of Misfortune* (1885-86). It was published in a newspaper, *The Boston Advocate,* as a forty-chapter serial. Thompson was the eldest of nine children. Her father had been a delegate to the state's 1868 constitutional convention and served in the legislature for six years during Reconstruction. A number of her relatives were important people, and one of her brothers became a physician in Charleston. Thompson studied at the Howard School in Columbia and then at S.C. Normal School. After completing her education, she became a teacher at Howard School and then at Poplar Grove School in Abbeville. People knew her as a good and capable teacher. Soon Allen University offered her a teaching position. She taught history, Latin, algebra, and geography. In 1886, she left to take a teaching position at a school in Texas.

Like many other authors and scholars, she had always liked to read. Although she is not as well-known today as some of the other people you will meet in this book, her writing was well received at the time. She wrote a number of essays and some poetry. A Texas newspaper published a short novel, *Only a Flirtation.* Her novel, *Treading the Winepress,* describes Columbia, S.C. in thinly-veiled terms as a beautiful "City of Flowers."

Annie Greene Nelson's literary bent probably came from her father, who liked to tell stories about life in the African-American community. Some of the stories were those of her great-grandmother who had come to the U.S. as an enslaved African. Ms. Nelson was born in 1902 in Darlington County. She was one of South Carolina's first African-American women novelists and the first to become well-known in the 1900s. One of thirteen children of sharecroppers who encouraged her to learn to read, she grew up doing typical farm chores and picking cotton. She was able to attend school only during the months when she was not needed on the farm. Although going to school required a seven mile walk, she made the journey whenever possible. She attended Benedict College and then Voorhees College. After graduating she worked as a nurse and as a school teacher. After marrying, she moved to Columbia where she founded a kindergarten for African-American children and taught there. It was the first one in Columbia.

Her love of reading eventually led her to begin to write stories based on her own experiences as an African-American. A poem, "What Do You Think of Mother?" was published in 1925. Her first novel, *After the Storm,* was published in 1942. Over the years, she wrote a number of other books and plays about

A Richard Roberts photo of Annie Greene Nelson holding her three-month old child in 1928. A scholar came across this picture while examining African-American photography. It led to her rediscovery as a novelist and getting national recognition. Courtesy of Roberts family.

African-American life. Most of these show blacks and whites living together peacefully. Her other work includes *The Dawn Appears* (1944) and *Don't Walk on My Dreams* (1961). She remained active even at an age when many people retire. At the age of eighty, she went back to school to study drama because she wanted to perform in a play she had written. Her literary career continued. Annie Greene Nelson died in 1993, a writer to the end.

The first African-American listed in *Who's Who in American Women* was Arthenia J. Bates Millican. She was born in Sumter in 1920. Her degrees include a bachelor's degree from Morris College, a master's degree from Atlanta University, and a Ph.D. from Louisiana State University. She has had a long career in higher education, teaching for eighteen years at Louisiana State University. In 1973, she accepted a position as professor of English at Norfolk State University. Dr. Millican is a writer as well as an educator. *Seeds Beneath the Snow* (1969) is a collection of short stories about life in the modern South. Her novel, *The Deity Nodded* (1970), has an urban setting and is based on the experiences of her sister who became a Muslim. Her writings in the 1970s and 1980s include a number of short stories and other novels.

Alice Childress said that her love of the theater came from her grandmother. Several of her plays have been produced off-Broadway. Born in Charleston in 1920, she has written novels, short stories, and non-fiction as well as plays. She grew up in Harlem and lived in New York as an adult. Her novel, *A Short Walk* (1979), describes the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was an important movement among African-American artists and writers that we shall describe later in the book. Childress's plays include *Let's Hear It for the Queen* (1976) and *When the Rattlesnake Sounds* (1975). She wrote a number of children's books. *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* (1973) is a story about the grim side of drug use. *Rainbow Jordan* (1981) is about growing up written from the viewpoint of a fourteen-year-old girl. Her work is quite popular. You can probably find a number of her children's books at local libraries.

Tommy Scott Young of Blair is a poet, a director, and a producer. His publications include *Crazy Wolf Sings a Crazy Wolf Song* (1973), *Black Blues and Swing Songs* (1977), and *Tommy Scott Young Spins Magical Tales* (1985). When Young was a child, his family moved to Philadelphia. However, they returned to South Carolina because the cold weather made his asthma harder to manage. In the South of the 1950s, he attended a one-room segregated schoolhouse and a military school. He entered the Air Force in 1960. After completing his service in 1963, he returned to attend Benedict College when he had trouble finding a good job in Baltimore. Because of his interest in art, his teachers persuaded him to go to California. There he studied at the Watts Writers Workshop in Los Angeles. He graduated from California

(Above Left) Arthenia Bates Millican. Courtesy of South Caroliniana Library. (Above Right) Tommy Scott Young. Courtesy of Tommy Scott Young. (Right) Alice Childress. Courtesy of South Caroliniana Library.

State University with a B.A. in painting and sculpture and a minor in theatrical arts. After these educational journeys all over the nation, he decided to come home.

His activity in the arts goes well beyond just writing. He has directed and acted in plays he wrote. Because he thought that school children seeing well-know artists perform was important, he established the Kitani Foundation in 1974. He has also been an artist-in-residence for the Arts Commissions in South and North Carolina and for Georgia's Council for the Arts. He likes to have his poems read aloud while other people dance and play music. This kind of work takes us back to the oral tradition followed by African-Americans since their first arrival in America.

Percival Everett has taught school, played the guitar, and even herded sheep for a living. He is a scholar who tried his hand at a number of things before he became interested in writing. The son of a dentist, he was born in Georgia and raised in Columbia. Graduating from high school in 1974, he left for college at the University of Miami. He always liked to travel and to fish. He became interested in philosophy and was studying for a Ph.D. at the University of Oregon when he decided to enter some of his short stories in a writing contest. His teachers had always encouraged his interest in literature. He won a writing fellowship to Brown University and obtained a master's degree there. His first novel, *Suder,* a story about a baseball player, was published in 1984 when he was twenty-six. By 1989 he had achieved success in the academic world as associate professor of English and Director of the Graduate Creative Writing Program at the University of Kentucky. He published another novel, *For Her Dark Sin,* in 1990. He has also published a book about Vietnam, *Walk Me to the Distance,* and a book of short stories.

Although Eleanora Tate is not a native of South Carolina, she lived in the state for several years. By birth a Midwesterner, Tate graduated from Drake University in Iowa and worked for an African-American newspaper in Iowa before turning to children's literature. Her books include *The Secret of Gumbo Grove,* which is set in South Carolina. It won the Parents' Choice Gold Seal in 1987. Both Nickelodeon and Public Television have dramatized another book, *Just an Overnight Guest.* She is also a poet and a writer of non-fiction.

Autobiographies and Non-Fiction

A number of South Carolina writers have left us a unique kind of literary treasure, the autobiography. Autobiographies tell the story of a person's life in their own words. Most of South Carolina's African-American non-fiction writers are people who are well-known for accomplishments outside the field of literature. These include the civil rights leaders Jesse Jackson and Septima Poinsett Clark. Cleveland Sellers, author of *River of No Return,* was a leader in the student protest movement. While you will meet many writers in this chapter, you will meet many of these more famous civil rights leaders and writers in other chapters.

Jacob Stroyer's autobiography, *My Life in the South,* was published in 1879. It was the first by a former enslaved African-American from South Carolina. Stroyer's father was born in Sierra Leone, Africa, and brought to America as a boy. His mother was born in enslavement. Jacob himself was one of fifteen children. He was born and reared on a South Carolina plantation with 465 other enslaved people. In his autobiography, Stroyer, who later became a minister in the AME Church, describes the evils of enslavement. For example, he tells how his father could not use his surname, Stroyer, in public. Instead, he had to use the master's name. He tells funny stories and stories about day-to-day life on a plantation. He relates his experiences as an enslaved African-American during the Civil War. His master sent him to wait on the officers and work on the fortifications at Sullivan's Island. Reading his book is a sobering experience for anyone who thinks there was anything nice about enslavement. His life story is also uplifting. It is the tale of an individual rising out of enslavement to become a leader in his community.

In his autobiography, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (1888), Daniel A. Payne recalls how as a teacher he had so few resources that he was forced to make his own books. Anxious to teach science to his students, he killed and stuffed various animals, including snakes, alligators, sharks, and insects. These were displayed on the wall of his school in Charleston. Once he even purchased a live alligator, and had one of his students incite the animal to bite. When the alligator's mouth was open, Payne shot him and then cut his throat. He dissected the alligator and hung it up for the students to examine. This is a far cry from the modern day frog which has given grief to so many biology students.

Payne, born in Charleston in 1811, brought this same enthusiasm to everything he did. During his long life he was an educator, an editor, and a poet, as well as the first African-American college president in the United States. Because his parents were free, he had opportunities not available to most African-Americans of his day. The grandson of a Revolutionary War soldier, he was educated privately as well as at school.

He trained as a carpenter, tailor, and shoemaker. He went to a Lutheran Seminary in Pennsylvania and received a Doctor of Divinity degree from Wilberforce University in Ohio. Payne taught school in Charleston and Philadelphia. In 1852, he became a bishop in the AME Church. As you have seen in the chapter on religion, he was an important religious leader in South Carolina. From 1836 to 1876, he served as president of Wilberforce University. In addition to an autobiography, he wrote *The Pleasures and Other Miscellaneous Poems,* a collection of poetry published in 1850. He was editor of *The Repository of Religions* and of *Literature and Science* from 1858 to 1863. After a long and vigorous life, he died in 1893.

The writing of diaries was quite popular in the 1800s. Not many African-American women had the education or the time to keep a record of their daily lives. However, some diaries written by African-American women in the years after the Civil War have survived. Frances Anne Rollins won an early and forgotten civil rights case. Born free in Charleston, she was the child of refugees from the Dominican Republic. During the Civil War, she attended school in Philadelphia. She returned to Charleston in 1865 to teach. One summer she attempted to travel by steamer to Beaufort. She was refused a first-class ticket. She complained to the Freedman's Bureau, and authorities fined the captain of the ship was fined $250.

Frances Rollins wanted to be a writer. When Martin Delaney of the Freedman's Bureau asked her to write his biography, she was thrilled. She left for Boston, where she was to do the work. Unfortunately, Delaney was unable to provide the financial support he had promised. Undeterred, she wrote the book anyway, supporting herself by sewing and doing clerical work. She began writing her diary when she was twenty years old. She described her exciting life in Boston and the opportunity she had to meet famous people like William Lloyd Garrison. Her book about Delaney was published in 1868. Because the publisher thought a book written by an African-American woman would not be accepted by the public, it was published under the name of Frank A. Rollin. She later married and had three children, all of whom graduated from college and became professionals.

Kelly Miller. Courtesy of South Caroliniana Library.

Kelly Miller was inducted into the S.C. Academy of Authors in 1993, fifty-four years after his death in 1939. This remarkable man was a scholar and mathematician who spoke out for civil rights. Born in 1863 in Winnsboro, he was one of ten children of sharecroppers. His mother had been enslaved. His father, who was free, was one of the relatively few African-Americans who served in the Confederate Army. After attending one of the schools set up during Reconstruction, Miller was sent to Fairfield Academy because of his talent in math. Howard University gave him a scholarship, and he graduated in 1866. His hard work earning money while he was in college enabled him to buy a farm for his parents. The Pension Office, a U.S. Government agency that helped Union Army veterans, employed him after college. He did post-graduate work at Johns Hopkins University

from 1887 to 1890 and received a master's degree in 1901 and a doctorate in 1903. In 1890, he became a math professor at Howard from which he retired in 1934 as a professor and dean. At Howard, he helped strengthen the science program.

Although Miller wrote some poetry and short stories, most of his work was non-fiction. After becoming concerned about the plight of his fellow African-Americans, he spoke out on civil rights. He lectured extensively on the topic and wrote a number of pamphlets. These pamphlets and his lectures were put together in book form and read widely at universities around the country. His works include *Race Adjustment* (1908), *Out of the House of Bondage* (1914), and *The Everlasting Stain* (1924). He wrote The *Disgrace of Democracy* as an open letter to President Wilson. It concerned the race riots in Memphis and East St. Louis and the refusal of the U.S. Government to help out. He was also a syndicated columnist and had articles that appeared in many major magazines.

Jane Edna Hunter, born a generation later in 1882, was part of the great migration North by African-Americans looking for a better life. She grew up on a plantation near Pendleton. In her autobiography, *A Nickel and A Prayer,* she describes her youth as the child of sharecroppers with little to call their own. Her father insisted that she learn to read and write. Determined to get ahead, she left home and worked as a household servant for a Charleston family. They encouraged her to train as a nurse. In 1905, she left South Carolina. Friends talked her into going to Ohio. She arrived with little money. She had difficulty finding anyone who would hire an African-American nurse. This experience persuaded her to do what she could to help other newly arrived African-American women to avoid similar problems. She began her work "with a nickel and a prayer." The end result was the establishment of the Working Girls Home Association, later the Phyllis Wheatley branch of the YWCA. This helped provide jobs and housing to thousands of penniless young women coming North to seek their fortunes. She also helped establish several other branches of this organization elsewhere in the country. This amazing woman later studied law at Baldwin Wallace College in Ohio and was admitted to the bar. She died in 1971.

George A. Singleton was sent to school at the age of four because he was always getting into trouble. Born in Conway in 1894, he grew up to become a journalist and an AME minister. His father, who was a community leader, had served as a delegate to the Republican National Convention during Reconstruction. He was anxious for his son to have an education. Educated at a two-room schoolhouse, George Singleton had to work hard as a young man to help support his family. After spending the morning at school, he delivered lunches to workmen for twenty-five cents apiece and held a number of other odd jobs. He saw bananas and grapefruits for the first time when he worked at a grocery store. In *The Autobiography of George A. Singleton* (1964), he describes his life and experiences. He decided to join the Army after he finished school and his parents died. In 1912, the Army sent him to the Philippines. After his discharge he returned to Columbia to Allen University. Recalled to the Army during World War I, he served as a chaplain and was sent to France. Later, he attended Boston University. Then he received a scholarship to go to the University of Chicago where he roomed with Benjamin Mays. In addition to his work as a minister, he taught at West Kentucky Industrial College and at Allen University and was president of Paul Quinn College. He became editor of the AME Church Review, wrote articles for many newspapers, and edited a number of books. A noted religious historian, he wrote *The Romance of African Methodism.* Writing as he neared the end of a long and productive life, he described his distress at the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and dedicated his book to the civil rights movement.

Benjamin Brawley, born in Columbia in 1882, believed that the American dream should be within the grasp of all children, regardless of race or sex. Best known as a scholar, he also wrote short stories and poems. Unlike many of his contemporaries in the late 1800s, he came from a comfortable home. His parents wanted their four children to be educated. His schoolteacher father, Edward McKnight Brawley, was a role model because of his own achievements. Ed-

ward Brawley's family had been free. Born in Charleston in 1851, Edward attended private schools as a young child and was sent out of the state to study. He graduated from Bucknell University in Pennsylvania in 1875, its first African-American student. Ordained a minister, he later helped found Morris College in Sumter and became its president. He wrote a religious textbook and edited several religious newspapers. Edward Brawley died in 1923.

Young Benjamin had high standards to meet, and meet them he did. Although he attended several different schools as his family moved around the South, he was greatly influenced by his parents. He attended the high school at Morehouse College in Atlanta and graduated from Morehouse with a B.A. degree in 1901. After six years of teaching, he received a second B.A. from the University of Chicago. In 1908, he received a Master of Arts degree from Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He taught English at the college level for several years. In 1920, he spent a year in Africa doing research. After his return, he was ordained a Baptist minister. Although he was a minister, he spent most of his career as a college professor. Over the years he published many books, articles, and poems. Many of these focused on African-American life and the need for justice. His long list of non-fiction works includes *A Short History of the American Negro* (1913), *The Negro in Literature and Art* (1918), *A Short History of American Drama* (1921), and *A History of the English Hymn* (1932). Magazines that published his articles ranged from the *Harvard Monthly* to the *Southern Workman.* His fiction and poetry includes *A Prayer* (1899), *The Dawn and Other Poems* (1911), and *The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus* (1917). He died in 1939, just a few years before the civil rights movement began to realize the justice about which he wrote. His achievements can best be summed up in the words of Benjamin Mays. In his own autobiography, Mays wrote that Benjamin Brawley helped African-Americans believe they could achieve.

In his autobiography *Born to Rebel* (1971), Benjamin Mays described a scene forever etched in his memory. In 1898 when he was only a child of four, a group of whites humiliated his father. They rode into his yard and repeatedly made his father bow down to them. He remembered the fear he felt that night. He knew that lynchings occurred in his community.

Many obstacles stood in the way of this remarkable man. Born in 1894 in the tiny town of Epworth, South Carolina, Mays was one of eight children from a sharecropper family. His parents had been born enslaved. His father could barely read, and his mother was illiterate. As a child, he was able to attend school only four months a year, because the school was open from just November to February. In March, farm work began. The seven mile round trip walk to school made education even more difficult. He wanted an education and was sent to S.C. State for further schooling. Although the school remained open, his father brought him home after four months to do farm work. This happened more than once. Finally he rebelled. Despite his father's anger, young Benjamin stayed at the school until it closed in May.

Mays did eventually get the education he wanted. Rejected by several colleges on account of race, he attended Bates College in Maine. He graduated with a Phi Beta Kappa Key, the highest academic award one can win in college. He always wanted to be a preacher. So he was on the debate team as well as the football team at Bates. To pay his school expenses, he worked odd jobs and also as a Pullman porter.

After earning his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, Mays began a long and distinguished career. He taught at both Morehouse College in Atlanta and South Carolina State. During a long and productive career, he did a study of African-American churches in the United States. He was dean of the School of Religion at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and for twenty-seven years he served as president of Morehouse College. While there, he built up the school's financial endowment. If all this was not enough, he was also president of the Atlanta Board of Education for twelve years.

Perhaps his early experiences with prejudice made him a civil rights activist. In the 1920s and 1930s, he became involved with the Urban League. In 1942 he co-authored the Durham statement. This was a document produced by a group of African-American Southerners that called for an end to discrimination. However, the group did not speak out against segregation itself. They thought attacking segregation would merely make white Southerners angry. Dr. Mays disagreed with this approach. He wanted to demand an end to segregation.

Mays also served on the board of directors of

the NAACP, and in this role he spoke out against lynchings and segregation. He wrote several books on race relations. His accomplishments were not ignored. President Kennedy appointed him to the Civil Rights Commission. Forty-seven colleges gave him honorary degrees. Atlanta named a street and a high school after him. Martin Luther King called him his "spiritual mentor." Four years before Mays' death in 1984, the Governor of South Carolina, Richard Riley, gave him the Order of the Palmetto. This is the highest award the state can give anyone. Larry Lebby painted his portrait, and it was hung in the statehouse. You can see it there today.

Nick Aaron Ford loved to teach but is best known as a scholar and an author. He wrote poetry and short stories as well as non-fiction. Born in 1904, he grew up near Ridgeway. Benedict College, which then included a high school, provided his education. He received a bachelor's degree at Benedict and a M.A. and Ph.D. at the State University of Iowa. Observers considered him a gifted teacher. He began his career teaching English at Schofield High School in Aiken. He also served as principal there before moving to Florida to accept another position. Schools in Texas and Oklahoma benefited from his teaching and administrative skills. In 1945, he accepted a position at Morgan State College in Baltimore, Maryland, where he stayed until he retired twenty-eight years later. His autobiography, written in retirement, is entitled *Seeking a Newer World: Memoirs of a Black American Teacher.* Dr. Ford also wrote many scholarly articles and nine other books, several of them with co-authors, including *The Contemporary Negro Novel* (1936) and *Black Studies: Threat or Challenge?* (1973). For *Best Short Stories of Afro-American Writers* (1950), he read over 1,000 stories which had been published between 1925 and 1950 in Afro-American newspapers. After he retired, he served as Director of the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities. This group ran programs that allowed minority students to work and earn a Ph.D. at the same time. Before his death in 1982, this scholar and activist received many awards.

Few people of any background can sing in eight different languages like Eartha Kitt. Most people think of her as an actress and singer, but she is also the writer of three autobiographies, including *Thursday's Child* (1956). Born in the South Carolina town of North in 1928 as the child of sharecroppers, she lost her parents at an early age. She had to support her sister by picking cotton. When she was eight years old, her aunt took her to New York City. There she attended school and learned to play the piano. However, she still had to help support herself. She did this by sewing. As a young woman, she won a scholarship to the Katherine Dunham dance school and then toured with them. In Paris she was seen by Orson Wells, the famous producer. He selected her to play Helen of Troy in his 1951 production of *Dr. Faustus.* She later appeared in Broadway shows and received several Tony nominations. In her autobiographies, she described her difficult childhood and the difficult path to fame.

When she was a child, Vertamae Grosvenor wanted to be an actress. As an adult, she realized her ambitions. She performed in *Personal Problems,* an opera that she also authored, and hosted *Horizons,* a highly regarded documentary series. Born in 1938 in Fairfax, South Carolina, she moved with her family to Pennsylvania as a child. Regular trips to the library fed a passion for reading about a life where people of African background could be anything they wanted. Leaving high school for a job, she saved her money. She went to Paris, the place of her dreams, and lived there for five years. Marrying and returning to New York, she began to write while her children were small. It is said that some people will do almost anything to make a living. Grosvenor did many different things, one of which was to sew an apron for an elephant! In 1970, her young son appeared on television and received a contract to have some poems published. The publisher took a look at a cookbook she was writing and decided to publish this too. She continued to write. An article in the Village Voice led to a job on National Public Radio. Her published works include *Vibration Cooking: Travels of a Geechee Girl* (1970) and *Thursday and Every Other Sunday Off: A Domestic Rap* (1972). Through her work, Grosvenor helped popularize African-American cooking for all Americans.

Continuing the Oral Tradition

Our discussion of literature began with the oral tradition and ends with it as well. Perhaps we are completing a circle by coming back to our roots. Despite all the changes of modern life, this tradition has survived.

For modern-day children, storytelling is more than just a way to preserve the past. Storytelling is a way to open doors to all the wonders found in books and to the variety of career choices open to the educated. Catherine Wheeler, a librarian at the Waverly branch library in Columbia, opened those doors. In the pre-Civil Rights era, the Waverly library was the only library for African-Americans in Columbia, a large brick building that had once been a white church. It became a gathering place for young people. Children came there after school to do their homework, often bringing along younger brothers and sisters. As head librarian, Wheeler welcomed and encouraged all the children, teaching them how to use the library's resources. However, she ran a tight ship. Children were not permitted to hang out on the steps. They were not permitted to fool around inside the library either. Children had to have a book in front of them while they were there.

Catherine Wheeler was another of the many people who showed that if you want something badly enough and are willing to work hard, you can succeed. Born in Edgefield in 1909, she moved to New York with her family as a small girl. Married at eighteen, she returned South when her father died and left her a house in Columbia. She began her career in the library as a cleaning lady, cleaning up the books. She wanted an education and she wanted to be a librarian. Wheeler began to attend school while working and raising a family. She received a bachelor's degree from Benedict College, a master's degree from New York University, and a Ph.D. from Atlanta University, all in library science. Her employers helped by giving her leave with pay during the summer so she could go to school.

Those who grew up during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s have many happy memories of the story hours held for all the children. When Catherine Wheeler read a story, an almost magical transformation took place. Her voice and facial expression would change with each character. She read many different kinds of books, "magnificent" stories, in the words of one who remembered her. Hundreds of children passed through her library and learned to like books as a result.

Catherine Wheeler also found a wider audience over the radio. Known as the "Story Lady," she told stories over the radio for a number of years. Another adult remembers her family huddling around the radio and listening to Wheeler's stories, tales which held the same magic as those told at the library. She enthralled her listeners for more than twenty years. Catherine Wheeler died in 1989 at the age of eighty.

Augusta Baker, who always loved to read, is another storyteller. She was born in Maryland in 1911, the only child of parents who were teachers. Baker studied folklore at the University of Pittsburgh. When she moved to New York State after her marriage, she attempted to attend Albany State Teachers' College. At first the school refused to admit her. Pressure from a local chapter of the Urban League and from Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of then Governor Franklin Roosevelt, led to her admittance.

In 1939, Baker became a librarian in New York City and began to work with children. She found that the way to reach them was through storytelling. Much of her work was with African-American children living in Harlem. African-American literature became her expertise. She looked for ways to improve their self-image. At that time, most good quality children's literature was written by and about whites. In 1953, she became the New York Public Library's storytelling specialist. She also edited a number of children's books, published two collections of children's stories, and put together a bibliography of African-American children's literature. She has served as a consultant for Sesame Street and hosted a weekly radio show. After retiring in 1974, she continued to work in the storytelling field as a consultant. She has received many awards during her career.

Moving to South Carolina in 1979 to be near her son, she became the storyteller-in-residence at the University of South Carolina. In her "second career," she has taught adults how to tell stories.

Ron Daise, a native of St. Helena Island, heard stories told by his elders when he was a child on the

island. Since then, he has written about the island in two books. He and his wife, Natalie, give dramatic performances of some of these stories combined with with music and slides to teach about the Sea Islands and their culture.

The storytelling tradition lives on.